

Tucson birthplace project being revived

Rhonda Bodfield Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Monday, November 21, 2011 12:02 am

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After decades of neglect, Tucson's birthplace - a cornerstone of the original Rio Nuevo plan - is on the verge of seeing some new life.

Only one thing stands in the way. The state-appointed Rio Nuevo board of directors.

Once, there were visions of a museum complex at the base of "A" Mountain, where the stories of Tucson's history and culture would be assembled.

But the site of the original Mission Gardens has languished for years, except for the erection of 6-foot walls to enclose four acres that once provided fruit and vegetables to early residents.

In the coming weeks, however, starting with the City Council Tuesday and followed by Pima County the first week of December, a nonprofit group is poised to take over operation and management of the gardens project.

The Friends of Tucson's Birthplace plan to start by planting 130 heirloom fruit trees, including fig, quince, pomegranate and apricot, in one quadrant of the property. Over time, the group plans to add crops in other areas, possibly a small grape vineyard and a "timeline garden" that would trace 4,000 years of agriculture, including early Hohokam and O'odham gardens, up to the Mexican and territorial eras.

There's a wrinkle in the journey to fruition, however. The Rio Nuevo Board has staked a claim to the property and is threatening to sue if the city and Pima County, which hold title to the property, allow the project to go forward.

The group has raised more than \$106,000, including nearly \$60,000 in grant funding, to pay for the first round of planting. The grants, however, expire in the spring. If the trees aren't in the ground by then, the money must be returned. And they can't put the trees and drip irrigation in unless the site is legally accessible.

Roger Pfeuffer, the former superintendent of the Tucson Unified School District and a co-chairman of the effort, sees a whole range of uses for the property: historic tourism, field trips, increased birding opportunities and educational programs on water harvesting and backyard gardens.

"The time to act is now," he said.

The agreement with both the city and county would allow the group to operate the site for five years.

Latino and west-side activists have begun mobilizing to protest the Rio Nuevo Board's claims on the land, holding a rally and showing up to voice their concerns at a recent board meeting.

City Councilwoman Regina Romero, who represents the west-side area, said her constituents are "up in arms" about the board's recent \$47 million claim that included a demand for a list of properties that includes the Origins park area.

Although the gardens are owned by Pima County, save for a small sliver of Tucson-owned land, Rio Nuevo has spent \$18 million, including the construction of the walls and archaeological digs on the site.

"The people are very afraid of losing a voice in their own backyard," Romero said. "They're afraid they'll put whatever they want in there because they were not elected, and they have not proven any willingness or responsiveness or interest to invest in the cultural components of what Rio Nuevo was all about.

"This is not just any land. This is the birthplace of Tucson."

The Rio Nuevo Board recently sent a letter to the county protesting the imminent agreement with the Friends, insisting it has an ownership interest. Any agreement related to the property, the letter warns, "will ultimately embroil the county in the present litigation" the board has with the city.

Former Republican state Sen. Jonathan Paton said he's willing to talk to the neighborhood and nonprofit about the uses for the property. "I don't have any master designs on that property," he said, adding that he empathizes with the still-lingering resentment area residents have over the way they were treated in the urban renewal efforts of the 1960s. But that doesn't allay his concerns about the property itself.

"Thus far, it's been an \$18 million money pit, and nobody should be happy with it at this point. And I don't see that the city is magically going to get better in its stewardship of the property."

With the city and Rio Nuevo embarking on mediation in mid-December to try to stave off litigation, Paton said, "going ahead with an outside agreement while we're in mediation would be an act of bad faith."

City Attorney Mike Rankin said the fact that there's a dispute shouldn't paralyze the city from moving forward, particularly since it doesn't believe Rio Nuevo has any claim on the land.

Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said the county is the rightful owner of the property, buying it with bonds authorized in 2004. "They're way off-base here, and I've warned them not to bring us into litigation or force us to spend money on this, because they'll be paying our costs when we win."

Huckelberry said he looks forward to the nonprofit making headway on preserving the historic and archaeological significance of the property. The county has made similar arrangements for the operations of many of its public parks and facilities, from the Pima Air and Space Museum to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, Colossal Cave, the Pima County Fairgrounds and Brandi Fenton Park.

The Mission Gardens is just a piece of the Tucson Origins Heritage Park, which was to include the recreation of Tucson's birthplace including the Mission San Agustín and its *convento*, granary and Carrillo House, for which the city spent \$9 million on design and plans.

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